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Inherent Poetry of Meaning

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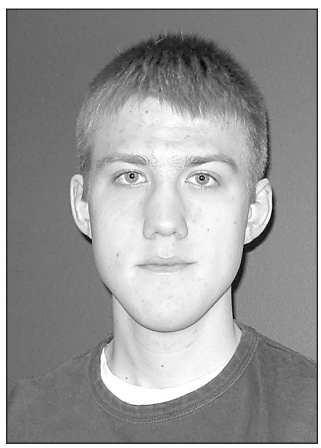

by Matt Gerrelts

Outside of academia, poetry tends to be marginalized as if it were nothing more than the textual embodiment of rhetorical flourish and emotive expression. Figurative language, or poetic essence, is understood as an add-on, or simply one way that language can be manipulated, rather than as the primary conveyor of linguistic meaning. Once the nature of metaphor is understood correctly, however, the very idea of truth is altered, and the creative aspect of humanity seen in figurative language is recognized as more fundamental to *meaning,* in the most general sense, than an objectivist theory of metaphor allows.

Because Paul Ricoeur recognized the power of metaphor and centered his philosophy on it,[1] his explorations in the search for human meaning and hope led him to hermeneutics, which in turn led him to metaphor, where linguistic meaning is both created and given. Metaphor is where the createdness of interpretation collides with the reality of the outside world. What follows, therefore, explains that interpreting metaphor is not merely a matter of understanding a text but understanding and perceiving the real world. As metaphor is ultimate to speech, so speech is ultimate to thought, according to Sallie McFague.[2] Thought, truth, and belief are bound up together in the discussion of metaphor, and through this discussion poetry manifests its hopefulness and prevents humanity from losing itself in an empty world.

Defining Metaphor

The discussion of metaphor is inherently ironic because speaking of metaphor is impossible without metaphorical speech; thus, defining metaphor is a task with a circular logic before one even begins. The difficulty in defining metaphor, however, goes even deeper. As Ricoeur points out in his second study in *The Rule of Metaphor*, metaphor is treated purely as a rhetorical device because of the linguistic emphasis placed upon the noun and act of naming in a theory of meaning; that is, the singular *word* has a self-contained meaning. Rather than focusing on the word as the source of meaning, Ricoeur argues that the sentence is the

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primary unit of meaning.[3] After all, as he quotes Emile Benveniste, "A sentence constitutes a whole which is not reducible to the sum of its parts; the meaning inherent in this whole is distributed over the ensemble of the constituents."[4] Words and signs do not carry all of their meaning within themselves but depend upon context, which is why one word can have multiple meanings. That is not to say that words carry no meaning in and of themselves, but that the sentence should have primacy over the word for meaning.[5]

When the word or semiotic order is given primacy in meaning, metaphor is reduced to a trope or ornament.[6] That is, metaphor is nothing more than a name for a resemblance or attribution. Each particular metaphor is, therefore, a substitute for something else. "Billy got into his old Chevy truck" is not particularly interesting; "Billy mounted his Chevy dinosaur," however, is a little more stimulating. Substitution theory posits that metaphor can be replaced by the literal sense without a loss in meaning and that understanding the metaphor only requires reinstituting the substituted term. Therefore, metaphor does not introduce anything new, and it is possible to *comprehensively* paraphrase a metaphor.[7] A metaphor therefore has less significance than the tinsel on a Christmas tree or the flowers on grandma's wallpaper.

This explanation of metaphor, however, cannot account for the differences between everyday metaphors and truly novel metaphors. Substitution theory ignores the fact that metaphors do bring new meaning and imagery that "literal" words do not and cannot carry. Substitution theory does not explain what makes the non-literal expression different from the literal—there is no reason for a difference in meaning at the purely semiotic level. Words change their meaning at the semantic level, with an established context. Without considering the semantic level, one cannot understand the process of developing metaphorical meaning or the reason for a word's meaning to be extended beyond common usage.[8] As Ricoeur points out, "The dictionary contains no metaphors; they exist only in discourse."[9]

The Excess of Meaning in Metaphor

One area of discourse where metaphor exists is poetry. Poetry, at its most basic level, is the destruction of ordinary language. The very structure of poetry, verse, is anti-grammatical, as it breaks up the common sentence. The verse of poetry is the "anti-sentence."[10] Like its poetic analogue, the metaphor disrupts ordinary language, introducing new ideas and concepts that language previously did not contain. To use a metaphor is to use words in non-ordinary ways, breaking through categories in order to form "new logical boundaries on the ruins of the preceding ones."[11] For example, "Time is the only jury" predicates a physical group on an abstract notion, and "the grill coughed on the steak" attributes an impossible action to an inanimate object. The categories and normal understandings are broken; thus, metaphors are conceptually deviant and destructive.

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At the same time, however, metaphors reduce such deviations. Poetry carries meaning because it remains linear even as it breaks up the direction of prose; that is, poetry is both verse and prose. The deviation that poetic structure creates can only exist because of prose, for a deviation can only exist if there is a standard from which it deviates and to which it calls attention.[12] A deviation can never be a total separation; if there were no relationship whatsoever between the anomaly and the norm, then one could not call the anomaly an anomaly—it would have no significance to the other category. Thus, poetry, even as it deviates from prose, simultaneously closes the gap by borrowing from prose structures. Without such a structure, poetry would be nothing more than meaningless words scattered on a page. In the same

way, metaphor reduces deviation even as it deviates because it points back to the so-called literal or common meaning.[13] Therefore, "When we receive a metaphorical statement as meaningful, we perceive both the literal meaning, which is bound by the semantic incongruity, and the new meaning, which makes sense in the present context."[14]

Thus, there is an "is" and an "is not" side to metaphor. If one says that football is war, there is a sense in which the game of football is war and a sense in which it is not war; the predication is not total because metaphor does not commit *completely* to one side or the other. The incongruence of the categories (war and sports) calls for a new category and altered meanings of the game and war. The metaphor cannot be identified with any meaning in particular because it creates new categories and extends meaning because there is always a surplus or excess of meaning carried in the differences within the new image.[15] The new image thus carries multiple meanings, and it is within the tension of these multiple, previously literal meanings that metaphor emerges. The tension of these multiple meanings is essential because once they are lost or forgotten, the metaphor is absorbed by the literal. Ricoeur says that polysemy is what separates poetically good metaphors from dead metaphors, or metaphors that no longer stimulate new cognitive spaces. For example, "foot of the bed" is no longer a "good" metaphor because it does not stimulate the mind to understand its meaning; rather, its meaning is obvious and more immediate because it is everyday. A "good" or "living" metaphor, on the other hand, would be uncommon, such as "the sunlight rubbed roughly against my face." This living metaphor brings together both the literal meaning, which is restricted by the deviating usage, and the new, figurative meaning, which is intelligible only in its semantic context. Metaphor is, therefore, a hypostatic union of meaning, wholly singular and unique, a term for which there is no obvious equivalent.[16]

The polysemy of metaphor is not just synchronic but also diachronic—metaphor does not just carry multiple meanings at the same time but builds on and compounds past meanings into the new ones.

Thus far, the discussion may appear to be exceedingly banal and only a matter of making a simple thing seem more complex than it is, or perhaps it is altogether very unconvincing. However, there is a reason for this discussion: When one realizes that metaphor functions in this way and is not merely an ornament, one can understand that metaphor changes our perceptions of reality.

Refiguring Reality

New variables always carry the potential for change, and that is what metaphor does. As new metaphors are created and used, language changes, as words take on meanings that they previously did not carry. The polysemy of metaphor is not just synchronic but also diachronic—metaphor does not just carry multiple meanings at the same time but builds on and compounds past meanings into the new ones. For example, "inflation is burning a hole in my pocket" is a metaphor built upon a dead metaphor. "Inflation" is a dead metaphor, having been absorbed by literal language, which is apparent in the fact that the reader understood that inflation refers to the general increase in prices or the devaluing of money and not filling a balloon with air. More about this will be demonstrated below, but for now it is important to see that metaphors build on each other, and it is through this process of creation and then absorption into literal language that language changes. If metaphor is the process by which language changes, then metaphor cannot be just a rhetorical device but is actually the process by which people make connections and see similarities between ideas,

thus adding meaning to words and phrases.[17]

As metaphor breaks the categories of language structures, it also breaks the structures of reality. Language is essential to thought, and if language about reality is modified, then perceptions of reality are equally modified. Thus, metaphor changes how people understand the world, and in so doing, it refigures the world, for reality is, in a very large part, what people make of it.[18] Reality is not simply "out there" but must be interpreted.[19] As people appropriate metaphors, how they view or interpret reality is altered, priorities are changed, and different actions are taken. Such appropriation of metaphors explains why television affects human behavior. The refiguring power of metaphor is the reason stories, traditions, and people influence other people's behavior. Ricoeur focuses on metaphor's power in biblical parables:

> In a parable the fiction brings about this epoche that wipes out what I am calling the first-order descriptive reference in favor of the metaphorical reference that works here as a model does for scientific understanding. In saying this, I am really doing nothing more than rejuvenating Aristotle's analysis in his *Poetics*. Poetry is mimetic because it is mythic. It mimics reality because it becomes a plot. In the same way, the parable redescribes life through the fiction of its story.[20]

As these re-descriptions obviously have influenced and continue to influence how millions of people understand their lives, it is clear that fiction and poetry are much more than just emotive figments of imagination; they are fundamental to the structures of conceptual thought. In fact, the emotive element of poetry is what gives poetry a strong, although often ambiguous, reference to the world that non-poetic language does not, for emotions are a vital mode of humanity's relationship with the world. Poetry and imagination are just as referentially connected to reality as is descriptive or "literal" language—this is apparent, however, only when one tosses out the reductionistic view of meaning, reality, and language that does not grasp their inherent interrelations. As Ricoeur points out, descriptive language is anything but exhaustive of human experience.[21] Nevertheless, we need clear examples of how metaphor functions in language and affects conceptualization.

The Inherent Metaphoricity of Language

The claim that metaphors are fundamental to language and change reality might seem ridiculous because metaphor is embedded deep within the structure of language itself. Metaphor is so inherent that one cannot see it any more easily than a person can see her own eye. Indeed, metaphor must be used to identify metaphor, and even then not without the aid of careful reflection.

In the book *Metaphors We Live By*, authors George Lakoff and Mark Johnson set out to demonstrate how essential metaphor is to the way people understand their language and experience. They begin with the concept that "argument is war." This metaphor serves as the fundamental source of many metaphors that are used every day.[22] For example, "His claims are *indefensible*," "I *lost* the argument," "His criticism is on *target*," "The *weak point* of the argument," and "He *shot down* my protests" all point to the idea that an argument is war. From this, "It is important to see that we don't just talk about arguments in terms of war. We can actually win or lose arguments"[23] Thus,

> The metaphor is not merely in the words we use—it is in our very concept of an argument. The language of argument is not poetic, fanciful, or rhetorical; it is literal. We talk about arguments that way because we conceive of them that way—and we act according to the way we conceive of things.[24]

To understand the impact of such a metaphor, Lakoff and Johnson ask the reader to "Imagine a culture where an argument is viewed as a dance, the participants are seen as performers, and the goal is to perform in a balanced and aesthetically pleasing way."[25] As an outsider to this culture, one would not understand people to be arguing but would understand them as doing something else. Calling such an activity an "argument" would break all the definitions and concepts surrounding the actions involved in an argument because the structure of their discourse would operate on entirely different premises.

Perhaps even more fundamental is the metaphorical nature of language *about language*; for example, ideas are conceived of as *objects* (e.g. "I *gave* him the idea."), linguistic expressions are understood as *containers* (e.g. "That sentence *has*

no profundity," "His words rang *hollow,*" or "One cannot *stuff* so many ideas *into* one lecture,"), and communication is structured by the notion of sending (e.g. "We *got* the message *across* to him," or "Your thoughts *came through* to me."). [26] Once one sees the metaphorical nature of language, it becomes clear that all prepositions fit into these categories, as they often describe a relative position of two non-physical "entities" as they are metaphorically conceived.

As metaphors embody concepts such as those given above, they not only give meaning but also hide meaning; there is both an "is" and an "is not" side to metaphor. Metaphorical structure, in other words, is only partial, not total; otherwise, one idea would be equivalent to another. Metaphors are meant to highlight one aspect and are in this way unable to be replaced easily. To use Lakoff and Johnson's example, "time is money" emphasizes the point that time *spent* cannot be regained, for one cannot exchange time at a bank like money.[27] Part of the metaphor does not fit, but that part of the metaphor is "hidden" in that the ability of money to be returned is not considered. This selectivity of metaphor causes people to conceptualize and recall very specific things when using or hearing metaphors.

Because a given metaphor cannot totalize a given concept, one must often use several metaphors simultaneously to highlight different concepts. For example, "The *content* of the argument *proceeds* thusly" conceptualizes an argument in terms of a container and a journey.[28] The "argument is war" metaphor is not enough to completely conceptualize what an argument is. *Argument is a journey, argument is a container,* and *argument is a building* are all metaphors that can be used to convey different aspects of "argument" that need to be highlighted at a given moment.[29] Thus, one often sees a mixture of metaphors, like "*So far* we have *constructed* the *core* of our argument," highlighting the *journey*, *building*, and *content* metaphors together.[30]

Again, what is apparent here is that metaphor is the means by which people conceptualize. Like any given word, a metaphor retains its distinctive positive definition in its differences from other concepts or words. The difference between a metaphor and another word is that metaphor breaks through the commonly established boundaries found in "bare" words by impertinent semantical usage. What separates the figurative from the literal? It would seem that the commonality of the usage does, for it is only when "leg of a chair" becomes common that it loses its figurative sense. However, many, if not most, conventional metaphors, like the "argument is war" metaphor, do not fit into the "dead" metaphor category. Systematic metaphorical expressions that seem to make conceptualization possible are far from being dead metaphors, even though they are common.[31] Indeed, systematic metaphors extend beyond everyday conversation and conceptualization to even affect how people do things in all areas, even in the supposedly literal field of science.[32]

Metaphorical Structures and Theory

Although scientists and intellectuals of a similar type often express the most skepticism toward the value of poetry and the imagination in the humanitarian sciences, one could easily argue that scientists are the ones who use metaphor more than anyone else. Scientific fields regularly must make use of models to explain phenomena.[33] Some models are merely pedagogical, while other models are paradigmatic; that is, they are the only way in which an idea can be expressed.[34] For example, light is described as both particles and waves, both of which are metaphors highlighting *one* aspect of light, and neither of which describes what light is *in itself* or literally. Without such models, nothing about light could be said at all.[35] However, such metaphors are but the product of much larger metaphorical paradigms. One of these paradigms, Newtonian physics, conceptualizes the world in deterministic, mechanistic terms: the world is a machine that has set operations, either moving cyclically or remaining static altogether—not moving in a linear direction. Evolutionary theory, however, changed this concept in that it recognizes change and development as more accurate ways to characterize reality.[36] Because reality changes and is not a static substance, things become relative to new situations at different times. Thus,

> instead of "particles of matter existing in an absolute framework of space and time," relativity informs us that there are no absolute measurements possible and quantum physics informs us that the ultimate particles are not "substances" as Newton supposed, but receding

pulses of energy so elusive that all we can say about them is that sometimes they behave like "waves" and sometimes like "particles."[37]

Evolutionary theory, and even more so the theory of relativity, reflects the realization that the scientist is not a purely objective observer of unchanging processes and substances but a participant in a larger framework of movement and measurement. All attempts to measure motion are relative because time is not simultaneous at all points in space and because the act of taking any measurement influences the thing being measured, hence Einstein's theory of relativity.[38]

Here one sees that the scientific metaphor that conceptualizes how people approach reality has changed. The universe is no longer viewed as a *collection* of *substance* that *mechanistically operates* according to *rigid* rules. Rather, the universe is understood as a fundamentally *relative* or *relational process* that *moves* in ambiguous or *loose* directions.[39] Words like these represent different paradigms that serve to illuminate or emphasize one or more aspects of reality but never the totality. One who emphasizes the organic, progressive nature of the world will naturally interpret how things work and thus will seek solutions in different ways from one who conceives of the world as mechanistic or cyclical. Therefore, even the most "objective" of sciences finds itself dependent upon metaphor to understand what it is studying.

To take one more example, imagine understanding problems primarily in terms of *chemistry* rather than as a *puzzle*. If problems were chemicals, "All of your problems are always present, only they may be dissolved and in solution, or they may be in solid form. The best you can hope for is to find a catalyst that will make one problem dissolve without making another one precipitate out."[40] Thus, "to live by the chemical metaphor would be to accept it as a fact that no problem ever disappears forever. Rather than direct your energies toward solving your problems once and for all, you would direct your energies toward finding out what catalysts will dissolve your most pressing problems for the longest time without precipitating out worse ones."[41]

The puzzle metaphor, on the other hand, sees an end to the problems. As people go on living, they are constantly trying to find solutions via this metaphor, where they have hope for a permanent fix.[42] This attitude toward problems is mostly unconscious—people do not stop and consider the means by which they associate and conceptualize something as vague as a "problem." It is in this enabling and structuring conceptualization that metaphor has the power to recreate reality.

The question that remains, then, if metaphor is so fundamental to thinking and is yet biased, is, How can truth be obtained?

What has been shown here, however, is that reality, which is indeed known through the processes of conceptualization, is dependent on metaphor. People depend upon poetic associations and connections to be creative and understand the world as a coherent whole.

Metaphorical Truth: Implications and Applications

If metaphor carries multiple meanings and never describes anything in total, how can one *know* anything? This question leads to the perennial problem of objectivity and subjectivity in knowing. To what extent is knowledge subjective, and how can objective knowledge be obtained? As was said earlier, the view that metaphor is just an ornament of language presupposes an objectivist view of reality—that is, "that what is real is wholly external to, and independent of, how human beings conceptualize the world."[43]

What has been shown here, however, is that reality, which is indeed known through the processes of conceptualization, is dependent on metaphor. People depend upon poetic associations and connections to be creative and understand the world as a coherent whole. Without the ability to merge categories and find links, the world would be incomprehensible. How does one know if the connections one is making are not in fact pulling one further out to sea? The fear of losing the direct, unfiltered access to the world "as it really is" seems to be natural, for most. [44] Rather than shy away from the ambiguity and polysemy of metaphor and subjective experience, one should mine these characteristics for the important clues they carry about how humans create and appropriate meaning.

Meaning in language cannot be univocal, for without polysemy—both the diachronic change in meaning and the synchronic possession of multiple meanings—language would extend infinitely, and some things could never be expressed. As Ricoeur says, "A language without polysemy would violate the principle of economy, for it would extend its vocabulary infinitely. Furthermore, it would violate the rule of communication, because it would multiply its designations as often as, in principle, the diversity of human experience and the plurality of subjects of experience demanded."[45] In other words, nothing could ever be communicated to someone else because *every* moment-by-moment experience for each person would have a unique meaning and thus a completely unique (and *new*) word or linguistic expression for it. Because another would not have the same conceptions and understandings (because no one ever thinks about anything in precisely the same way), any expression other than one's own would be unintelligible. Thus,

> we need a lexical system that is economical, flexible, and sensitive to context, in order to express the spectrum of human experience. It is the task of contexts to sift the variations of appropriate meanings and, with the help of polysemic words, to devise discourse that is seen as relatively univocal—that is, giving rise to just one interpretation, that which the speaker intended to bestow on his words.[46]

The polysemy of metaphor is thus the means by which people are able to understand each other, although not comprehensively.

These differences in meaning from one person to the next are often extremely subtle, and because meaning is somewhat relative, accurately measuring these differences and where they lie is impossible. However, these alterations can be partially illustrated by the non-equivalence of paraphrase. Lakoff and Johnson argue that people conceptualize sentences metaphorically in spatial terms, which affects how they perceive the relationship between form and content.[47] As an example, they explain that cultures orient their concepts based upon a "canonical person" as the central reference point:

> Since people typically function in an upright position, see and move frontward, spend most of their time performing actions, and view themselves as being basically good, we have a basis in our experience for viewing ourselves as more UP than DOWN, more FRONT than BACK, more ACTIVE than PASSIVE, more GOOD than BAD. Since we are where we are and exist in the present, we conceive of ourselves as being HERE rather than THERE, and NOW rather than THEN.[48]

Thus, *up, front, active, good, here,* and *now* are oriented toward the canonical person while *down, back, passive, bad, there,* and *then* are oriented away from that person. This order corresponds to the fact that in English it is more normal to say, "up and down" than "down and up," "good and bad" than "bad and good," and "now and then" than "then and now." The main principle is this: "Relative to the properties of the prototypical person, the word whose meaning is NEAREST comes FIRST."[49] This spatial metaphor is but one example of the inherency of metaphors to our conceptual systems:

> While some aspects of the meaning of a sentence are consequences of certain relatively arbitrary conventions of the language, other aspects of meaning arise by virtue of our natural attempt to make what we say coherent with our conceptual system. This includes the form that we say things in, since that form is conceptualized in spatial terms.[50]

Thus, even a paraphrase will have a different

meaning, albeit often subtle, since paraphrases always involve abbreviation and structure changes, highlighting different aspects and reflecting different orientations of different conceptual systems in the changing of word order and adoption of synonyms.

It does not follow, therefore, that understanding something requires objectively descriptive language or language that has unmediated reference to reality. Objectivism or logical positivism argues that language which is not descriptive—that is, giving pure information about something—is necessarily emotional or purely within the subject, isolated from anything external to the subject.[51] This dichotomy of the object and the subject, and its conclusion that poetic language has no reference or relation to reality, is unwarranted: "At stake in this explication is nothing less than the meaning of the words *reality* and *truth*."[52]

What must first be modified is one's understanding of language and reality. If one cuts language off from reality, as a third entity, merely describing but not involved in and affecting what the world is, then language becomes ultimately irrelevant and unnecessary for thought. However, language is necessary for thought—it is impossible to think without using language.

What must first be modified is one's understanding of language and reality. If one cuts language off from reality, as a third entity, merely describing but not involved in and affecting what the world *is*, then language becomes ultimately irrelevant and unnecessary for thought. However, language is necessary for thought—it is impossible to think without using language. If this is the case, then language does not exist purely for itself but because of and only in reference to the world which is opened up to the mind. Ricoeur says, "If language does not exist for itself, but in view of the world that it opens up and uncovers, then the interpretation of language is not distinct from the interpretation of the world."[53]

When one believes metaphor to be central to language and thus to thought, how one finds truth is structured by the character of metaphor, that is, the tension of the "is" and "is not." One can no longer deny the situated and relational character of truth, which is always perceived, but it is yet perceived only in part; the remaining part is therefore filled by the human imagination. Ricoeur says that "as the conjunction of fiction and redescription suggests, poetic feeling itself also develops an experience of reality in which invention and discovery cease being opposed and where creation and revelation coincide."[54] Truth therefore is paradoxical; the only way to speak of it is dialectically because to pin down a theory of truth and how truth is attained assumes an objectivist, literalist meaning. Metaphor depends upon the literal for meaning but at the same time makes the literal impossible. [55]

Lakoff and Johnson clearly demonstrate that even as metaphor influences perceptions and actions, metaphors are often structured according to reality or human experience. In other words, a constant tension exists between the world as it forces itself on perceptions and perception as it forces itself on the world.[56] Thus, even as the myth of objectivism is to be rejected, so also must the myth of subjectivism. The third choice, if it can be identified, is not as simple but more true.[57] The third view is really a view in process of being explained, and perhaps it will always be in process of being explained. Since the beginning of philosophy, no one has been able to attain the

"middle" between an objectivist account and a subjectivist account of knowing. There seems to be no true Hegelian synthesis of this problem. Lakoff and Johnson find the third, experientialist option in metaphor, which is an "imaginative rationality," for metaphor involves categories, entailments, and inference as well as seeing things in different and new ways:[58] "[T]ruth is always given relative to a conceptual system and the metaphors that structure it. Truth is therefore not absolute or objective but is based on understanding. Thus sentences do not have inherent, objectively given meanings, and communication cannot be merely the transmission of such meanings." [59] It would be well to remember that "A sentence can't mean anything to you unless you understand it [;] meaning is always meaning to someone. There is no such thing as a meaning of a sentence in itself, independent of any people. When we speak of the meaning of a sentence, it is always the meaning of the sentence to someone, a real person or a hypothetical typical member of a speech community."[60]

Truth and meaning are thus inherently relational and dependent on subjective understanding but are grounded in a physical reality. To be enveloped in language is not like being trapped in a prison or cut off from reality. As Terry Eagleton says, "To be inside a language is to be pitched into the world, not to be quarantined from it."[61] Thinking of language as separate from reality and not involved directly in what reality is in itself, so to speak, assumes the objectivist stance that the world can be observed and kept at a distance. Language, even as it colors interpretation, grounds interpretation, as it is simultaneously part of the referent that it refers to. Even as reality is not inert, so metaphor and language are not inert.

Ontological Reevaluation and Meaning

The metaphorical tension of the "is" and "is not" therefore changes how the world is understood. After all, as Vanhoozer asks, "Can one create metaphors without believing them and without believing that, in a certain way, 'that is'?"[62] Metaphorical truth calls for a new ontology, one that calls for a "being-as" that corresponds to the act of "seeing-as" of metaphor.[63] Rather than understanding only the actualized world as what is real, metaphor sees the world of potential as being actualized as well, enlarging our vision by expanding beyond what is real to include the possible.[64] A modern ontology, such as that provided by Kant, could not have faith in possibilities but could only perceive the actual. In an objectivist ontology, the empirical is that which is real, and the imagination cannot have any role at all without denying knowledge. This understanding is possible, of course, only because sense-information (e.g. sight, smell, touch, etc.) is thought to be uninterpreted and language peripheral to understanding. When language, imagination, and metaphor are understood as central to the world itself, however, knowledge and truth are still possible in the presence of faith, opening up the possibility of *hope* for the future.[65]

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With an ontology of reality in which metaphor and man are so tightly bound, self-understanding, and thus meaning, must come through the mediation of language.[66] How can this meaning be found, and what meaning is there for mankind? Knowledge is found through hermeneutical reflection. As Vanhoozer explains, "We cannot 'see' ourselves directly; rather, we must 'read' ourselves by interpreting what we say and do."[67] It is in this self-reflection that poetry becomes essential, because it is the task of the poet to express the human condition by struggling and working with language. [68] It is through the poetic imagination that people are able not only to reflect on themselves and make sense of the world but also find hope for the future. It is this *hope* for the

future, something that exists only in possibility and imagination, that gives humanity purpose and meaning.[69] As Vanhoozer says,

> Literal or descriptive language alone ultimately diminishes human being because it is unable to articulate those fundamental values that orient our lives. In sum, scientific and literal language fail to serve humanity because they are unable to express the possible. Bereft of this access to the possible, humanity loses its passion and must resign itself either to the actual or to the necessary, to "what is" or "what must be"—not to "what might be."[70]

As poetry provides a means to hope, one should not dismiss poetry and the imaginative aspect of humanity as trivial or false but embrace it as it is fundamental to human *being*. Poetry gives meaning to human life and is inherent in God's creation. It is not for nothing that the Scriptures contain poetry as well as histories and epistles. Indeed, all religious language, including Scripture, is inherently poetic as it deviates from ordinary language, opens up a new world to readers, and causes readers to understand themselves in a new way in light of the text.[71] Poetry is inherent not merely to meaning but to the possibility of knowing God.[72]

Endnotes

1. Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995). Ricoeur is strict in maintaining that he is a philosopher and emphatically not a theologian, the reasons for which I only partially understand. One of the clearest distinctions that Ricoeur makes is as follows: "Now I am not a theologian, but a philosopher. It is not my task to say to what extent it is true to say that the main category of Christianity is promise rather than presence, that God is the 'one who comes' rather than the 'one who is.' I do not claim that this hermeneutic of the resurrection alone is valid and orthodox. I only say that, more than any other, it gives rise to thought" (205).

2. Sally McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 32. McFague quotes John Middleton Murry: "Metaphor is as ultimate as speech itself, and speech as ultimate as thought....Metaphor appears as the instinctive and necessary act of the mind exploring reality and ordering experience."

3. Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, trans. Robert Czemy (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), 45.

4. Ibid., 67.

5. Ibid., 44, 76-79.

6. Ibid., 45.

7. Paul Ricoeur, "Creativity in Language: Word, Polysemy, Metaphor," *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, eds. Charles Reagan and David Steward (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 130.

8. Ibid., 131.

9. Paul Ricoeur, *Rule*, 97. As will be shown later, this statement should be qualified: dictionary contains no "living" metaphors. There are many metaphorical words in the dictionary, although they are all conventional (therefore "literal") and none of them came to hold such meaning without first developing in the semantic context.

10. Ricoeur, *Rule*, 151. Ricoeur quotes Jean Cohen.

11. Ricoeur, "Creativity in Language," 131.

12. Ricoeur, *Rule*, 150-151.

13. Ricoeur, *Rule*, 152. Ricoeur writes, "Deviation exists only if words are taken in their literal meaning. Metaphor is the process through which the speaker reduces the deviation by changing the meaning of one of the words. As the rhetorical tradition established, metaphor is truly a trope, that is, a change of the meaning of words; but the changing of meaning is the answer of discourse to the threat of destruction represented by semantic impertinence. And this answer in turn consists of the production of another deviation, namely in the lexical code itself. [Quoting Mallarme:] 'Metaphor intervenes in the interests of reducing the deviation created through impertinence. The two deviations are complementary, but precisely because they are not situated on the same linguistic plane. Impertinence is a violation of the code of speech, and is located on the syntagmatic level; metaphor is a violation of the language code, and belongs to the paradigmatic level. There is a sort of dominance of speech over language, with the latter agreeing to change in order to give meaning to the former. The totality of the procedure comprises two inverse and complementary phases—(1) situation of deviation: impertinence; (2) reduction of deviation: metaphor'" (152). Ricoeur critiques this view, saying that "Since the theory thematizes just the lexical mutation, the study of the function of poetic language will be deprived of its essential support, namely the mutation of meaning at the same level at which the semantic impertinence takes place. It is not surprising, then, that one falls back into a theory of connotation and, at the same time, to an emotionalist theory of poetry.

Recognition of the new semantic pertinence achieved through the lexical mutation is the only thing that could lead to an investigation of the new referential values attached to the innovation in meaning and open the way to an examination of the heuristic value of metaphorical statements" (156).

14. Ricoeur, "Creativity in Language," 132.

15. Ricoeur, "Creativity in Language," 131. Ricoeur writes, "In other words, the figure of speech which we classify as metaphor would be at the origin of all semantic fields, since to contemplate the similar or the same—and we know now that the similar is also the same—is to grasp the genus, but not yet as genus, to grasp the same in the difference, and not yet as above or beside the difference."

16. Ricoeur, "Creativity in Language," 131. That is not to say that differences in so-called synonyms are always obvious. Metaphor has a very subtle way of affecting conscious thought. On another tangent, McFague (in *Metaphorical Language*) says that "Metaphorical statement is, as we recall, always a judgment of similarity (and difference) between two thoughts: Jesus 'is and is not' God. Metaphorical statements are never identity statements; hence, idolatry, 'Jesusolatry,' is avoided, and while we look through the story of Jesus to gain an understanding of what it means to live under God's rule, we cannot make the illegitimate move of identifying Jesus with God" (51). That is, Jesus is not *all* that there is to God. Also, Jesus is not just God but also human, even as he is not just human but also God. Thus, Jesus is in his own category of identity.

17. Ricoeur, "Creativity in Language," 131.

18. Ricoeur writes, "What is the function of metaphor? By this question we are sent back to the strategy underlying the use of metaphor. If ordinary language aims at communication by cleverly reducing ambiguity, and if scientific language aims at univocity in argumentation by suppressing equivocity, what is the finality of metaphorical language? Our concept of likeness as the tension between sameness and difference implies that a discourse which makes use of metaphor has the extraordinary power of redescribing reality. This is, I believe, the referential function of a metaphorical statement" ("Creativity in Language," 132).

19. Ricoeur writes, "When we ask whether metaphorical language reaches reality, we presuppose that we already know what reality is. But if we assume that metaphor redescribes reality, we must then assume that this reality as redescribed is itself novel reality. My conclusion is that the strategy of discourse implied in metaphorical language is neither to improve communication nor to insure univocity in argumentation, but to shatter and increase our sense of reality by shattering and increasing our language" ("Creativity in Language," 132-133).

20. Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 58. Ricoeur explains elsewhere, "I shall now take the two expressions 'parabolization' and 'metaphorization' as synonyms, it being understood that a metaphor can occur not only between words but between whole sequences of sentences. The isotopies play a role at this discursive level comparable to that of the semantic fields that enter into interaction in metaphor-sentences. *Parabolization is the metaphorization of a discourse*. In the case of the narrative-parables, it consists of the metaphorization of a narrative taken as a whole. Intertextuality thus becomes an extension and, consequently, a particular case of the interaction I have placed at the center of my theory of metaphor" (161).

21. In *Figuring the Sacred*. Ricoeur writes, "If some have held the poetic function of discourse to exclude its referential function, this was because, at first, the poem (again understood in a wide sense that includes narrative fiction, lyricism, and the essay) suspends a first-order referential function, whether it is a question of direct reference to familiar objects of perception or of indirect reference to physical entities that science reconstructs as underlying the former objects. In this sense, it is true that poetry is a suspension of the descriptive function. It does not add to our knowledge of objects. But this suspension is the wholly negative condition for the liberation of a more originary referential function, which may be called second-order only because discourse that has a descriptive function has usurped the first rank in daily life, assisted, in this respect, by science. Poetic discourse is also about the world, but not about the manipulable objects of our everyday environment. It refers to our many ways of belonging to the world before we oppose ourselves to things understood as 'objects' that stand before a 'subject.' If we have become blind to these modalities of *rootedness* and *belonging-to* (*appartenance*) that precede the relation of a subject to objects, it is because we have, in an uncritical way, ratified a certain concept of truth, defined by adequation to real objects and submitted to a criterion of empirical verification and falsification. Poetic discourse precisely calls into question these uncritical concepts of adequation and verification. In so doing, it calls into question the reduction of the referential function to descriptive discourse and opens the field of a nondescriptive reference to the world. It is this nondescriptive reference to the world that is awkwardly covered over by the traits of the emotional function of poetic language. As though emotions were simply 'subjective'! What we here are calling emotions, in the wake of poetic language, are precisely modalities of our relation to the world that are not exhausted in the description of objects" (222).

22. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 4.

23. Ibid., 4.

24. Ibid., 5.

25. Ibid., 5.

26. Ibid., 10-11. Such examples fit what Richael Reddy calls the "conduit metaphor."

27. Ibid., 12-13.

28. Ibid., 95.

29. Ibid., 88-89.

30. Ibid., 102.

31. Ibid., 54-55. Lakoff and Johnson point out that metaphors like "foot of the mountain" or "head of cabbage" are isolated instances of metaphorical concepts; that is, people "do not speak of the *head*, *shoulders*, or *trunk* of a mountain, though in special contexts it is possible to construct novel metaphorical expressions based on these unused parts." Such isolated expressions "do not interact with other metaphors, play no particularly interesting role in our conceptual system, and hence are not metaphors that we live by." Thus, "It is important to distinguish these isolated and unsystematic cases from the systematic metaphorical expressions...like wasting time, attacking positions, going our separate ways, etc.... The fact that they [systematic metaphors] are conventionally fixed within the lexicon of English makes them no less alive." Here, Lakoff and Johnson seem to devalue the more traditional understanding of metaphor, which is a metaphor not grounded in some coherent system of conceptualization but in creative novelty. It seems that there are different kinds of metaphors, but the distinctions between them are not clearly defined.

32. The realm of advertisement depends upon the metaphorical capacity of the human mind, needing it to make connections between otherwise disconnected items: "The entire enterprise of advertising rests on exploiting this subliminal level where hidden metaphors of self-fulfillment are titillated: the makers of an advertisement juxtaposing cigarettes, cowboys, lovers, snowcapped mountains, and firelight know well the power of this collage to create a subliminal, embryonic model of pleasure" (McFague , *Metaphorical Theology*, 70).

33. McFague writes, "When we turn to the sciences, whether mathematics or the natural or social sciences, we also find metaphor to be central. Perhaps it is most surprising to those who suppose that metaphor belongs only in the arts and religion to discover it at the most basic level in mathematics: the numerical analogue. Seeing the similar number among otherwise disparate entities is a metaphorical act, as in six apples, six moons, six ideas, six generous acts" (*Metaphorical Theology,* 34).

34. McFague writes, "Models in the behavioral sciences are entirely heuristic; that is, they are pragmatic and expendable. As we shall see, models in science and in theology are not dispensable but essential, and while no one model may be permanent, some models are always necessary. Nonetheless, the use of models in the behavioral sciences clearly highlights the necessary dialectic between detail and simplification: while models must be sufficiently detailed to provide rich linkages between two subjects, they also need to simplify the details of the principal subject" (*Metaphorical Theology*, 72).

35. McFague*, Metaphorical Theology*, 86.

36. Ibid., 77.

37. Ibid., 77.

38. Ibid., 77-78.

39. McFague writes, "The implications of this view of science—admittedly at its most elusive frontier, atomic physics—are significant. Among them are the end of determinism and substance as well as absolute objectivity and certainty, instead, we find stress on relativity, the importance of relations and process rather than substance, and an appreciation of the scientist as a participant rather than as observer" (*Metaphorical Theology* 78).

40. Lakoff and Johnson, 143.

41. Ibid., 144.

42. Ibid., 145.

43. Ibid., 146. That is, the objectivist viewpoint thinks of language as wholly separate from the world rather than inseparably bound to reality.

44. Of course, even when one is speaking purely of sense information, nothing remains uninterpreted: "Our physical senses are themselves organs of interpretation. What distinguishes us from our fellow animals is that we are able in turn to interpret these interpretations. In that sense, all human language is meta-language. It is a second-order reflection on the 'language' of our bodies—of our sensory apparatus," writes Terry Eagleton, in *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 60.

45. Ricoeur, *Rule*, 115.

46. Ibid., 115.

47. Lakoff and Johnson, 136.

48. Ibid., 132.

49. Lakoff writes, "For example, suppose you are pointing out someone in a picture. If you say, 'The *first* person on Bill's left is Sam,' you mean, 'The person who is on Bill's left and *nearest* to him is Sam'" (133).

50. Lakoff and Johnson, 136.

51. Ricoeur, *Rule*, 226-227; *Figuring the Sacred*, 222.

52. Ricoeur, *Rule*, 229.

53. Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 235. Ricoeur continues to say, "Hence self-understanding in the face of the text will have the same amplitude as the world of the text. Far, therefore, from being closed in upon a person or dialogue, this understanding will have the multidimensional character of biblical poetics. It will be cosmic, ethical, and political. I hold, therefore, that a hermeneutic that takes the world of the text as its central category does not run the risk of privileging the dialogic relation between the author and the reader, nor any personal decision in the face of the text" (235).

54. Ricoeur, *Rule*, 246.

55. Ricoeur writes, "The paradox consists in the fact that there [sic] there is no other way to do justice to the notion of metaphorical truth than to include the critical incision of the (literal) 'is not' within the ontological vehemence of the (metaphorical) 'is.' In doing so, the thesis merely draws the most extreme consequence of the theory of tension. In the same way that logical distance is preserved in metaphorical proximity, and in the same way as the impossible literal interpretation is not simply abolished by the metaphorical interpretation but submits to it while resisting, so the ontological affirmation obeys the principle of tension and the law of 'stereoscopic vision'" (Ricoeur, *Rule*, 255-256).

56. They give another good example of metaphor in the realm of politics: "Suppose Carter announces that his administration has won a major energy battle. Is this claim true or false? Even to address oneself to the question requires accepting at least the central parts of the metaphor. If you do not accept the existence of an external enemy, if you think there is no external threat, if you recognize no field of battle, no targets, no clearly defined competing forces, then the issue of objective truth or falsity cannot arise. But if you see reality as defined by the metaphor, that is, if you do see the energy crisis as a war, then you can answer the question relative to whether the metaphorical entailments fit reality" (Lakoff and Johnson158).

57. Lakoff writes, "All cultures have myths, and people cannot function without myth any more than they can function without metaphor. And just as we often take the metaphors of our own culture as truths, so we often take the myths of our own culture as truths. The myth of objectivism is particularly insidious in this way. Not only does it purport not to be a myth, but it makes both myths and metaphors objects of belittlement and scorn: according to the objectivist myth, myths and metaphors cannot be taken seriously because they are not objectively true. As we will see, the myth of objectivism is itself not objectively true. But this does not make it something to be scorned or ridiculed. The myth of objectivism is part of the everyday functioning of every member of this culture. It needs to be supplemented—not by its opposite, the myth of subjectivism, but by a new experientialist myth, which we think better fits the realities of our experience" (Lakoff and Johnson 158).

58. Lakoff and Johnson, 184.

59. Ibid, 197. Terry Eagleton makes fun of the postmodern stress on the term "absolute": "It can't be the case that the fish is both a bit off and not a bit off. It can't be fresh for you and putrid for me, even if putrid is the way I like it. This does not rule out the possibility of doubt or ambiguity. Maybe I am not sure whether the fish is off or not. But if I'm not sure, it is absolutely true that I am not sure. I can't be sure and not sure at the same time. It can't be that I am sure from my point of view but not from yours. Maybe the fish was fine two hours ago and is now distinctly dubious. In that case, what was absolutely true two hours ago is no longer true now. And the fact that it is not true now is just as absolute" (Eagleton, *After Theory*, 105).

60. Lakoff and Johnson, 184.

61. Terry Eagleton, *After Theory (*New York: Basic Book*s, 2003)*, 62.

62. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 69-70.

63. Vanhoozer writes, "In Western thought, truth has traditionally been associated with present being, 'what is' or actuality. Truth was defined as the correspondence of mind to what is (the actual) –as *adequatio intellectus et rei*. Ricoeur believes that metaphorical truth demands a new notion of being, one in which a 'being-as' would correspond to the 'seeing-as' initiated by metaphor" (70). Merold Westphal, in "In God We Trust?" *The Hermeneutics of Charity: Interpretation, Selfhood, and Postmodern Faith*, eds. James K. A. Smith and Henry Isaac Venema (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), explains that "all seeing is seeing-as. It is construal rather than mirroring. For all seeing-as is seeing from some perspective (Nietzsche) or seeing within some paradigm (Kuhn) or language game (Wittgenstein) or horizon (Gadamer). We never attain the view from nowhere (Nagel). Our finitude consists in our embeddedness in some particular location in historical, cultural, linguistic, ideological space. Theologically construed, this means not only that our interpretations do not dwell in that heavenly world of propositions, but in some earthly site that is different not only from other human earthly sites (in the aftermath of Babel), but also from the divine point of view" (101).

64. Vanhoozer writes, "metaphor does not refer to the real as if it were an inert given. Rather, metaphor presents things 'as in act,' as *becoming*. This is the '*ontological* function of metaphorical discourse, in which every dormant potentiality of existence appears *as* blossoming forth, every latent capacity for action *as* actualized.' In other words, corresponding to the polysemy of language is a polysemy of being: 'the reference of metaphorical utterance brings being as actuality and potentiality into play'" (*Biblical Narrative*, 70).

65. Vanhoozer writes, "For if the creative imagination provides the means to *think* what is beyond the bounds of objective knowledge, its product, figurative language, provides the means to *speak* what is beyond the bounds of descriptive language. Ricoeur's succinct verdict on Kant is telling: 'It is because Kant had no idea of a language which would not be *empirical* that he had to replace metaphysics by empty concepts.' We may say then that Ricoeur, in the spirit of Kant's third *Critique,* has found it necessary to deny knowledge in order to make room for creative language, namely, for symbols, metaphors and narrative"(*Biblical Narrative*, 46).

66. Vanhoozer writes "Ricoeur believes that humans come to self-understanding only through the mediation of *language*. But it is precisely this important stage over which Heidegger has jumped. Ricoeur, on the contrary, proceeds to human existence by an analysis of language which best expresses it" (28).

67. Vanhoozer, 58.

68. Vanhoozer writes, "A slight alteration of a Kantian thought sums up Ricoeur's position on this matter: poetry without philosophy is blind; philosophy without poetry is empty." Weinsheimer says, "Metaphor is not itself interpretation but rather the opportunity for it"(58). See Joel Weinsheimer, "Gadamer's Metaphorical Hermeneutics," *Gadamer and Hermeneutics,* ed. Hugh J. Silverman (New York: Routledge, 1991), 182.

69. Vanhoozer writers, "In a culture dominated by science and technology, the primary danger is the loss of meaningfulness. The world is there to be used, not valued. Objects are there to mastered, not cherished. Ricoeur fears that such a view of the world is in danger of losing the human itself. It is only thanks to the poetic dimension of language that we can view the world as 'meaningful' and not merely 'manipulable'" (60).

70. Vanhoozer, 61.

71. Ricoeur summarizes: "(*a*) Poetic language is language that breaks with everyday language and that is constituted in the crucible of semantic innovation. (*b*) Poetic language, far from celebrating language for itself, opens up a new world, which is the issue of the text, the world of the poem. (*c*) The world of the text is what incites the reader, or the listener, to understand himself or herself in the face of the text and to develop, in imagination and sympathy, the self capable of inhabiting this world by deploying his or her ownmost possibilities there. In this sense, religious language is a poetic language. Here, the word 'poetic' does not designate a 'literary genre' that could be added to narration, prophecy, and so on, but the overall functioning of all these genres as the seat of semantic innovation, as the proposition of a world, and as the instigation of a new understanding of oneself " (*Figuring the Sacred* 232).

72. Ricoeur writers, "But religious language is not simply poetic. Or, if one prefers, it is so in a specific manner that makes the particular case a unique one, an eccentric one. What differentiates it is precisely the naming of God. All the literary genres we have referred to, from narration to parable, constitute 'speaking about God.' This specificity does not abolish any of the poem's characteristics. Rather it adds to the common traits of the poem the circulating of an overarching referent—God—that coordinates the texts at the same time that it escapes them. Touched by God's 'name,' the poetic word undergoes a mutation of meaning that needs to be circumscribed" (*Figuring the Sacred* 232-233).